Night Teams Over Korea

By Capt. Charles H. Brown, USN (Ret.)

When the Communists invaded South Korea in June 1950, four composite squadrons, VCs 3, 4, 33 and 35, were sending night-fighter and attack teams flying radar-equipped F4U Corsairs and AD Skyraiders to the *Essex* (CV 9)-class carriers. Each team had five to seven pilots, four or five airplanes and 40 maintenance personnel. The squadron rosters included a core of veteran carrier pilots who had little or no night carrier experience, a few carrier pilots who had fought at night in WW II and a few pilots just out of the training command. All of these fliers were trained instrument pilots, using skills not yet common among Naval Aviators. To land their airplanes, or to locate and kill the enemy in the dark of night, they had also learned the trick of dividing their vision and concentration between their airplane's instruments and the black outside world.

The night-attack teams added aircrewmen to operate the radar in the three-seat ADs. These men worked in a dimly lit compartment behind the pilot's cockpit, applying expertise with the radars earned through hours on the scopes.

The Carriers' Night War

At the war's start, a VC-3 team was aboard *Valley Forge* (CV 45) near Korea. Soon other carriers and their night teams joined her. For a few months the night fliers had little night work; instead, they flew much-needed close air support missions for the ground forces. Supporting the Marines' success at Inchon and the advance north to the Yalu River, the night teams continued covering the troops until November 1950 when

hordes of Chinese soldiers crossed the river, driving the allies south.

By January 1951 the allies had stopped the Communists near the 38th parallel, where the frontline stayed for the remaining two and a half years of the conflict. In those years the night teams spent most of their sorties flying night interdiction, or heckler, missions. They participated in two purely night-interdiction operations, Moonlight Sonata and Operation Insomnia, in the first half of 1952. Rarely did the night teams strike a power plant or other fixed facility.

Night Heckler Mission

Carrier personnel, particularly flight deck crews, did not understand why they had to work practically 24 hours a day just to allow a few aviators to fly at night. The night fliers had their own problems living on board ships. The noise of flight operations disturbed their rest during the day, and getting a good meal in the middle of the night was difficult. Despite the friction, the night aircrews were respected for their ability and courage to fly and fight in the strange night world.

The night crews briefed their two-plane, night missions in almost empty ready rooms, which they shared with a day squadron. The majority of the day pilots

Facing page, this dramatic shot from the 1953 *Kearsarge* (CV 33) cruisebook shows a night recovery on board: straight deck, dustpan lights, no centerline, no floods, paddle's lighted suit. Below, note airscoops on the turtlebacks of these AD-4NL Skyraiders to accommodate crewmen sitting in the aft compartment.

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Courtesy of Capt. G. G. O'Rourke

were in the rack. Red lighting in the ready room allowed the night pilots and crewmen's eyes to adapt more quickly to the coming darkness. There were no lights on the flight deck to help pilots and flight deck crews prepare for launch.

Korean War-era carriers commonly used hydraulic catapults, unreliable by today's standards, to launch the night airplanes. When ready to go, the night fliers felt the sharp jolt of the hydraulic cat as it shot them toward the stars. Flying formation between the ship and shore, they often climbed through clouds and then descended into the darkness below the overcast before sighting the land shown on their radar scopes.

The fliers usually separated overland, using their radars to avoid mountains. However, the radarmen could not pick out small targets with their equipment. North Korea at night was black. In the valleys, where the rail lines and roads lay, it was even blacker. Relying on their eyes, sometimes aided by illumination from parachute flares to detect movers along the railroads and roads, the pilots flew as low as possible to find targets and still navigate safely through the dark valleys.

The night pilots disagreed on the effectiveness of flares. When properly placed over the target, a difficult task on a windy night, flare light was helpful but often the light was diffused and disorienting. Furthermore, planes flying below a flare gave enemy gunners a great target. Most pilots pulled out of their bomb or gun runs above the flares.

The communist truck drivers drove with no or half-covered lights that the hecklers could barely see. Locomotives were easier to spot with their smoke and steam, and even easier when outlined by the winter snow.

On moonlit nights, the night fliers had more success finding targets, but the North Korean gunners could see the hecklers. Before the end of the war, antiaircraft fire along the major supply routes was very heavy. Consequently, the pilots had to compromise on a search altitude—lower to find targets, higher to avoid gunfire.

When a pilot found a target, he attacked and directed his partner to the scene, generally marked by fires started by the first attack or the light of flares over the target. The night pilots trained hard to hit and destroy the relatively small targets with their cannons, bombs and rockets. The 20mm cannon became the weapon of choice, because a well-placed burst would stop a train or truck and possibly start a fire. Bombs finished the job.

After a three-hour hop, the night fliers descended for landing and broke into a landing signal officer's (LSO) pass pattern at the ship. The carrier's only light, a red masthead light, was a welcome sight on a dark, cold, drizzly night.

Flying the downwind leg about 150 feet above the water, a night pilot kept one eye on the dim red masthead

light, while scanning the instruments with his other eye. When abeam the carrier, he started a turn toward the ship. Carefully descending to about 70 feet, the pilot flew a standard rate turn, just above stall speed, until he could distinguish the LSO's lighted suit and paddles, usually not before the last 45 degrees of turn.

Dustpan lights barely outlined the flight deck edges, but there were no centerline lights, stern drop lights nor flood lights. The threat of striking the steel cable barriers at the end of the straight flight deck's landing area put a lot of pressure on carrier pilots during any landing attempt. At night, the pressure increased. The pilot had only a few seconds to answer the LSO's signal in the groove, then the "cut" and a trap.

As a new night-attack pilot in VC-35 soon after the war, I learned a simple description of a night mission from a Korean veteran: "Strap in and turn up the engine. Worst I've ever heard, but I guess it's O.K. What a cat shot. This bird's not going to make it, but I'm airborne. Black as a hog's stomach. Finished the hop, ready to land. Hmmm, engine sounds good. Roger pass, great trap. Tell the maintenance chief, best airplane I ever flew."

Night-Fighters

Carrier-based night-fighters had no opportunity to clash with the communist MiGs that patrolled the Yalu River. However, during the last two months of the war, June and July 1953, all or part of two night-fighter teams worked ashore with Marine night-fighters. VC-4 Detachment 44 flew the only Navy jet night-fighter of the era, the F3D Skyknight, providing cover for B-29 bombing raids hitting North Korea. The detachment aircrews had several night fights, accounting for one MiG and losing one of their own.

Reflections

Forty-eight night teams flew about 10 percent of the carriers' combat sorties. Those teams lost about six airplanes per thousand combat sorties, a slightly higher loss rate than the overall carrier combat loss rate. And the difficulties inherent in night operations on a straight-deck carrier added many operational losses.

Even at that price, night interdiction missions did little to end the war. However, sortie for sortie, the night fliers did a tremendous amount of damage. Vice Admiral Jocko Clark, who commanded the carriers and then Seventh Fleet during the war, stated, "[Curtailed night operations] gave the Communists almost a free hand at night." Those observations led to significant improvements in a carrier's ability to operate at night—a capability responsible for the view of today's carrier aviators: "The night belongs to us."

Capt. Brown served aboard *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116) and *Boxer* (CV/CVA 21) during the Korean War, joining VC-35 as a nugget shortly after the conflict ended. He later served in various squadrons and staffs before becoming XO and CO of Attack Squadron 112 during the Vietnam War. He is now retired.

Facing page, a VC-4 Det 44 aircrew poses with their F3D Skynight. Team leader Lt. Gerry O'Rourke stands second from left. Right, VC-3 F4U-5N Corsairs stand at the ready on a crowded flight deck aboard *Essex* (CV 9) during a Korean winter.